

The Holy Communion:

A Sense of Unworthiness no Ground for Keeping back from it.

A

S E R M O N,

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BY THE

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This Discourse, written to meet a special case, and afterwards repeated by request, is now published in consequence of the often expressed wish of many devout persons of our congregation, who thought that what had helped to clear their own views, might be, under the Divine blessing, serviceable to others in the like uncertainty.

The Lord vouchsafe to all who draw nigh unto His Altar, so to be fed with His most precious Body and Blood, while on earth, that they be with Him evermore in Heaven.

THE HOLY COMMUNION :

A SENSE OF UNWORTHINESS NO GROUND FOR
KEEPING BACK FROM IT.

“Whoso eateth my Flesh and drinketh my Blood hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”—
St. John, vi. 53.

“And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.”—
v. 40.

It is a subject of constant grief to those who have at heart the interests of the Church of God, that the proportion of communicants among her baptized members is so small. Of the multitudes made hers by the washing of water and the Spirit, only some handfuls come to seek at her altars the bread of everlasting life. The causes which keep men away from the table of the Lord, are, no doubt, manifold and diverse. I shall not attempt to scan the motives of individuals, nor yet to decide how far they may be excusable in

their unhappy position. But if among those causes one may be found which grows out of a mere misunderstanding; if among those stumbling-blocks there be one capable of removal by the method of simple explanation, we are constrained to attempt the clearing up of such a difficulty, not only by considerations of duty, but by the hope of immediate results in good. Every clergyman knows that such a cause does exist, and that many conscientious, moral, and even religious persons are kept thereby, year after year, at a distance from the table of the Lord. There are those who would come at once, if persuaded that they were worthy; who so regard the Lord's Supper as to think that they must have advanced considerably in spirituality before they can hope to be admitted there. To this one point your attention is now called. Shall any one keep back from the table of the Lord because he does not think himself *good enough* to come? Shall he wait until he is good enough? To consider these questions, and to decide them on the general principles of our holy faith, is the object of the following remarks.

I propose for your reflections these two inqui-

ries:—I. What is the Holy Communion, practically considered? II. What qualifications are required in those who come to it?

I. What, then, is the Holy Communion, practically considered? I say, practically considered; not theologically. There is no intention of entering into any of the deeper and most mysterious questions which open before the thoughtful gaze of the advanced Christian, as he contemplates this august and dread sacrament. But, as a first question, as a general inquiry, What is the Holy Communion? What is it,—not to the saint in his retirement, not to the devout recluse in his nearer walk with God, not to the priest who tremblingly handles the sacred things, not to the angels who gaze into these mysteries with the wish to sound their sacred depths; not to any of these,—but to the world at large, to the great family of man, to the busy, hard-working classes? What is the Holy Communion to the sinful and the suffering? What is it to us all?

Before answering, let me first refer to a widely prevailing error. Many think, or act as if they thought, that this Holy Sacrament is a kind of badge of distinction; a symbol which designates

those who receive it as more spiritual than others. It is the privilege of a class. They who this morning shall remain behind when the bulk of the congregation is gone, and who shall kneel at the altar, are better than the rest, more advanced in piety, more spiritual: and in the reception of the communion they manifest that already existing superiority before a sinful world. And until the rest, who go away, have become as good as those who stay behind, they should continue to absent themselves and would be playing the hypocrite if they were to remain and communicate.

I would state this as plainly as possible, that you may see how numbers of persons think of the sacrament and of the position and qualifications of communicants. I state the view in order to denounce it. To this wretched idea of the communion, as a badge of distinction and a sign of an existing superiority in holiness, we owe it in great part, that our altars are so thinly attended, I had almost said, so comparatively deserted. And if there be any language suited to describe my horror at such an idea, that language I should desire to appropriate and apply. Let us

banish that notion forever from our thoughts. Let us drive it forth from the Church, into that outer darkness fit for all that wars against souls and thwarts the progress of Christ's kingdom.

What, then, is the Holy Communion? We reply, in the language of our Prayer Book, that it is a sacrament generally necessary to salvation. "NECESSARY TO SALVATION." Brethren, these are not the words of the preacher, but the words of your Prayer Book. The Church has authority for saying that without the two sacraments, men cannot (ordinarily) be saved. Our Lord declared, with reference to baptism: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." And of the Holy Communion He said: "Except ye eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink his Blood, ye have no life in you." Unwelcome truths, no doubt, to many; and truths which no man could venture, on his own responsibility, to declare; but truths notwithstanding, because uttered by Him who knoweth all things, and who styled himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

But why is the reception of the Holy Communion necessary to salvation? For this simple

and sufficient reason: that it is the appointed way of coming to Christ. He who will not come to the Communion does not come to Christ in the way of Christ's own appointment. And unless one come to Christ for salvation, how can he be saved at all?

These statements require explanation.

The great mystery of the Gospel is thus expressed in Holy Scripture: that the WORD was made FLESH. The great wonder was this: that the Son of God became man; took our nature upon Him; was grafted into our stock; entered into the great human family. The blessing of the Gospel dispensation was, that God and man were thus brought together, that the gulph betwixt the infinite and the finite was spanned, that a COMMUNION was established between heaven and earth. Why was this done? For an obvious reason. God became man, that man might come to Him without fear, and see Him, and touch Him, and know His glory and His mercy, and be and abide in His society.

The holy Evangelists and Apostles are most earnest in their elucidation of this mystery. None more so than St. John, who says:—"That

which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the word of life that which we have seen and heard, declare we unto you." This it was which called forth all his glowing eloquence, and all his ardent thankfulness, and all his rapturous praise ; that his Creator should have condescended to become a man like himself ; that He had submitted himself not only to the knowledge and observation of mortals, but to the vision and contact of their material organs ; that they had seen Him, and touched Him, and handled Him. In this lay the wonder of the Gospel. It was the establishing a HOLY COMMUNION between men and God. And to that end, God took a Body and Blood, and Flesh and Bones such as we have, and in them He came and dwelt among His people. This mystery we confess as that of the Incarnation.

It was through personal intercourse with Jesus Christ, that His influence was felt. For all who sought relief from Him, the first and necessary step, was to go where He was Bodily Present. When this had been done, all blessings

followed. The sick were healed, the lame walked, the lepers were cleansed, the dead were raised, sinners received pardon. But before these effects followed, the Bodily Communion must be established. He might, by His Divine Power, have worked His miracles over all the earth, but He limited them to Judea. He healed those who came to Him, who spoke to Him, who looked into His loving eyes, who laid hold of His garment, who caught His hand. It was the physical union, the material touch, the spoken voice, the outward visible sign and gesture, by which all these marvels came to pass.

I conclude, that the life of the Son of Man on earth was a HOLY COMMUNION between himself and mortals; and that the establishment of that Holy Communion was His appointed way of giving them spiritual life, pardon and salvation.

Let us now apply this to our own circumstances.

Does this Holy Communion at present exist? Has it existed since the Lord's departure from this earth? It has existed: it does. Although He is separated from us in the Flesh, and although our eyes can no longer behold Him, nor

our hands handle Him, yet doth the communion between Him and His people still remain. As real as ever, it is maintained by the instrumentality of that Sacrament, the name of which announces the special end secured thereby.

To prove this, two things are necessary: 1st, To show that Christ continues to exist in His Human Nature, just as truly, really, and completely a man, as when He was on the earth. 2dly, To show that we have the means and opportunity of access to Him in that Human Nature, just as really as if we had lived in Judea in the days of His Incarnation. We claim both of these points as the constant doctrine of our Church.

As to the 1st, no words of mine could express it so well as do those of the 4th of our Articles of Religion. "Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again His Body, with Flesh, Bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature; wherewith He ascended into heaven, and there sitteth, until He return to judge all men at the Last Day." Nothing could be plainer than this. The Son of Mary is in heaven in the very same flesh which He took

of her substance, and in which He worked out our salvation. So says the 4th Article.

The second point follows logically upon the first. But let me quote St. Paul. In 1 Cor. x. 16, he asks these questions: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the Communion of the Blood of Christ? the bread which we break, is it not the communion of the Body of Christ?" We have seen that Christ in his Body, Flesh, Blood, in all things appertaining to His human nature, is at this moment in heaven. But St. Paul affirms, by implication, in his queries, that in the Lord's Supper we are brought into Communion with Christ as man, and are made partakers of His Body and Blood. Again, our Lord himself announces, in the words of the text, and generally throughout that chapter from which they are taken, that, "Except we eat His Flesh and drink His Blood, we have no life in us; that His Flesh is meat indeed, and His Blood drink indeed; that whosoever eateth His Flesh and drinketh His Blood hath eternal life, and shall be raised among the just at the last day." Now, brethren, either these words have no relation to us and our times, or else they imply some means

whereby Christ in that Flesh and that Blood is now accessible to us. What the instrumentality is, I claim to have already shown by the words of St. Paul. It is also declared by our Lord himself: "Take, eat, THIS is my BODY. Drink ye all of this, for THIS is my BLOOD." It is further declared by the language of our own Communion Office, in which the people are warned beforehand, as ye yourselves were last Sunday, that Almighty God hath given His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, not only to die for us, but also to be *our spiritual food and sustenance IN the holy sacrament of the Lord's Supper*; in which we pray so to eat the Flesh of the Son of man, and to drink His Blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by His Body, and our souls washed through His most precious Blood; and in which we give thanks after receiving, for that we have been fed with the most precious Body and Blood of God's dear Son. The whole tenor of the Eucharistic Office shows a deep conviction of the double fact which we have stated: 1st. That Christ continues to exist in His human nature, just as truly, really, and completely a man, as when He was on this earth; and, 2d. That

we have a mode of access to Him in that sacrament, just as real as we should have had if we had been His contemporaries in Judea. Remember, brethren, I say just as *real* a mode of access. I entirely disclaim the thought that it is in the same way. The access is a spiritual and a mystical one. But it is no whit less real than that of those who walked beside Him, and saw and touched Him, and dwelt beneath the same roof with Him, and sat down with Him at the same table.

The general conclusion from what has now been said is this: that to come to the Lord's Supper is simply to come to Jesus Christ; to come to Him in the way of His appointment; to come to Him in the way especially arranged for us by Himself, in view of His departure from the earth and ascension to heaven. It is this Holy and Blessed Communion with our Saviour which has been perverted and changed into a badge of distinction among brother Christians and a sign of superiority.

II. The second part of our subject remains to be considered: What are the qualifications required in him who would approach the table of the

Lord? I reply simply those which were required to approach His Person when He dwelt in Judea; simply those which are required to approach His Person when we must give in our account at the Last Day.

Who then were fitted for His company and His personal, visible communion when He was on the earth? Regarded in themselves, none. But was their unfitness, was their unworthiness, a cause for their keeping away from Him? Why, brethren, what idea could be more monstrous? What more effectual to prevent the salvation of souls? And it is my firm conviction, that this notion has been suggested and fostered by Satan himself, as a sure way of keeping men from their Saviour. It was not the world that loved Him first; but He that loved the world. He came to a race sunk in trespasses and sins. He came announcing that His mission was not to the just, but to sinners. Suppose that any one of those who needed Him most, had kept away from Him through a feeling of unworthiness. What mistake could have been more fatal? their need of His help was their strongest claim on His favorable notice. They all understood this. Every-

body understood this. No one who looked at Christ one instant could fail to see it at a glance. And what was the consequence? Why, that they all flocked to Him at once. They came just as they were; in their sins, in their sickness, in their unutterable perplexities, discouragements, and sorrows. The lame made shift to crawl towards Him; the blind strained their sightless balls in the direction where they knew that there was light to be had for the asking; the foul leper perceived that he, the very outcast from among men and the refuse of the earth, could go to that One without fear of a repulse. Their infirmities, so far from keeping them away, were the certain passport to His presence.

Such were the Saviour's actions. His teachings corresponded. The parable of the prodigal son displayed the same principles. The profligate was in a far country, naked, degraded, miserable; a feeder of swine, a victim of harlots, a beggar and an outcast. In that condition he be-thought him of his father's house. What if he had waited there until ready to go? The question is, how could he have got ready? how would waiting have helped him? He wanted

food and raiment and shelter. He thought of his father's house, because the supplies were there. He did wisely to go, just as he was, and cast himself on the mercy of that father. And his expectations, as you know, were not disappointed.

Let us make application of these our Saviour's acts and words. If there be any one here present, who is in doubt about coming to the Communion, in doubt of his sufficient preparation, in doubt of his possessing the necessary requirements; let him ask himself what he would have done, so far as he knows his own heart, if he had lived in those days when the Saviour was visibly present on the earth. Would he have felt himself free, (knowing the character of that Saviour, and having heard the fame of His miracles, and His sanctity and benevolence,) would he have felt himself free to go at once to Him and profess the desire to be His faithful follower? Would the consciousness of lingering sin, sorrowed for and detested, but still within him, have appeared an insuperable obstacle to the interview? would he have concluded, "I am not fit to approach Him, but will go when I have be-

come better, holier, worthier than I at present am?" Who does not see that this would have been to shut himself out from the very place, from the very quarter whither he ought to go at once? Who does not see, that one must remain forever away from Christ, if waiting for those qualities which Christ alone could give to those who sought them from Himself? And who can doubt, that in the case of every applicant to Him for mercy, Christ, if He saw the heart right, the repentance sincere, the faith firm, would never have turned away, and never did turn away, a single human being because of his deficiencies? Ye who have never yet come to the Holy Communion, think rightly of that blessed ordinance. It is the COMMUNION with Jesus Christ. To come to it is simply to come to Him. Perfection is not required in the communicant as a condition: it is by that sacrament that he is to attain perfection. Deep spirituality is not to have been previously attained; it is in that sacrament that the spiritual life is to be developed. Entire cleanness from sin is not a prerequisite; for it is to the very Saviour of sinners that the receiver draws near. But these three things

only are needed of him who would commune : A hearty sorrow that he is a sinner ; a firm faith that Christ can forgive his sins and cleanse from all uncleanness ; a sincere wish to receive those blessings and to lead a godly, righteous, and sober life. And these are the conditions on which the Holy Communion becomes indeed a savor of life. Thus saith the Church :—"Ye who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in His holy ways, draw near with faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort." This is what the Church requires in communicants, because this is what the Lord required of those who came to Him when he dwelt on the earth ; a hearty sorrow, an honest intention, a firm faith. Without these none may become a communicant ; without these none may be saved.

The remarks which have now been made were addressed to such as are kept away from the Lord's table through such conscientious scruples as are the result of erroneous views. But these persons form a comparatively small class.

There is another much larger, that of those who are restrained by the consciousness of habitual sins which they are unwilling to break off. These persons are no less conscientious in their scruples than the others. Their consciences make known to them the existence of old, deep-seated habits of sin. They love those sins; they cannot bring themselves to forsake them; and therefore they dare not come to the Lord's table. This is their position. They know it; and the Searcher of hearts knows it. Let no one of these mock us by professing a reverence for the holy table and a dread of profaning the hallowed precincts of the altar. This is the outward pretence; the inward causes are, a will not yet subject to Christ; a love of sin; a fear of cutting off indulgences; a craving after the forbidden fruits of this evil and perishing world. If any man have such a heart as this, let him, as he values his own soul, stay away. But let him also remember, that this insincere, unsettled, lukewarm state, while it keeps him away from the altar, keeps him away no less surely from Christ. While he remains in wilful and habitual sin, he is not indeed fit for the sacrament. But this is

not all. He is not fit to die. He ought not to lie down this night upon his bed in such a state, lest he should awake to the horrors of a lost eternity. For him, the making ready for the sacrament is a work no less needful than the making ready for the judgment-seat of Christ. If he fails to accomplish the former, he will as utterly fail in the latter. And if this should be the end, and life should close upon such a procrastinator, the Church has no more to do in the matter than to utter the prayer that the Lord will have mercy on his soul.



